**Synod 2017 affirmed again the denomination’s commitment to the poor and the hungry.**

Synod 2016 had instructed the executive director of the Christian Reformed Church, Steven Timmermans, to “prioritize goals and assign resources for . . . justice and mercy.”

To fulfill that directive, the CRC’s Justice, Inclusion, Mercy, and Advocacy collaboration group produced a study entitled, “Remembering, Reaffirming, and Reinvigorating Our Response to Global Humanitarian Challenges.”

The report retrieved a long list of statements and initiatives made by the CRC, beginning with a report on world hunger from 1978. It celebrated the considerable progress made in alleviating hunger and poverty in the world, noting that the number of people living in extreme poverty has fallen from 1.9 billion in 1990 to 836 million in 2015, among other encouraging statistics. It also brought to the attention of synod that great need remains, including at present 65 million displaced persons.

In the light of the many synodical statements of support for justice ministries, synod urged “CRC members, congregations, and agencies to remember and renew [the] passion to serve God by serving the poor and oppressed in ministries of relief, development, proclamation, and advocacy for justice.” Synod delegates also reaffirmed the conclusions and recommendations contained in previous CRC reports on the causes of hunger.

Some delegates wished for more emphasis on the gospel in these commitments. Doug Alderink, Classis Wisconsin, said that justice work must always revolve around an “intentional expression of the gospel.” In contrast, Phillip Leo of Classis Chicago South said what had impressed him as he walked in a climate justice demonstration was how the gospel emerged naturally from a concern about justice. He reminded the synod that “our world belongs to God.”

*With the long-term denominational commitment to justice in mind, synod endorsed the creation of “a renewed and revised multiple agency collaborative program that would build on existing ministry capacities.” The goals are to educate the denomination on the causes of poverty and hunger and to increase the effectiveness of current denomination ministries for people who are suffering from drought, famine, war, climate change, trafficking, and persecution.*

To these initiatives, synod attached a long list of supporting grounds citing past decisions, effective ministry directions already taken by the denomination, and ecumenical commitments.

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**Social Justice Coordinator to Retire After 44 Years of Serving CRC**

This June, after decades of dedication and leadership, Peter Vandermeulen will retire from his role as coordinator of the Office of Social Justice. Vandermeulen has served in this role for 22 years and has spent his entire career working for the Christian Reformed Church.

Fresh out of college in 1973, Vandermeulen took a position in disaster relief with Christian Reformed World Relief Committee, now World Renew.

Three years later, Vandermeulen went to Bangladesh, where he said he was ready to be a great gift to the community he was serving, “I thought I was bringing all the knowledge, but I learned a lot from those farmers. Interactions with real people give you humility, and I also learned that God is a lot bigger God than I thought I knew,” said Vandermeulen. “This kind of experience forces you to sort out your childhood faith and come to an adult faith and learn how big God’s love and justice is.”

Vandermeulen served for six years there before moving on to the Dominican Republic and then West Africa.

“Over time, it became obvious to me that it was really important to look at the systems that kept people poor. Advocacy was a logical extension, the final leg of the stool of ministry,” said Vandermeulen. “Justice is not all by itself, but needs to be infused in everything we do, a part of all our ministries.”

The Office of Social Justice and Hunger Action (OSJ) was formed in 1995 to address and implement the recommendations set out in the “Freedom to Serve” report to the banner.org  | July/August 2017  | THE BANNER 19

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**Peter Vandermeulen**

Synod 1993. Vandermeulen was tasked with leading the ministry that studied the root causes of poverty and hunger. Over 22 years, he helped educate churches, assisted other denomination ministries, and worked to bring significant change in the political sphere through advocacy. Vandermeulen started the CRC’s HIV prevention program and had a key role in developing the Kimberley Process, an accord set in place to prevent the flow of “blood diamonds” that were used to finance wars.

“We have been able to do this overseas through World Renew but haven’t done it as well in North America,” Vandermeulen said. “It is the vision of the OSJ that the CRC will do a better job of advocacy within our communities, to lend our power and voice.”

Vandermeulen leaves the OSJ officially on June 30, but will continue working as a volunteer on an international peacemaking project in Western Africa in an area where there are many Christian Reformed congregations.

His role at OSJ will be filled by Rev. Reggie Smith, recently appointed director of the Offices of Social Justice and Race Relations.

—Krista Dam-VandeKuyt